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Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development and the twenty-fourth special session of the General Assembly: priority theme: social integration

Statement submitted by the World Youth Alliance, a non-governmental organization in general consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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Statement

1. Social integration is a process whereby all members of society live and work together for the common good. This process can best be understood as a commitment to solidarity. Since solidarity is the foundation for sustainable development and the building of free, just and peaceful societies, the World Youth Alliance welcomes the opportunity to continue its review of "social integration" as the theme of the forty-eighth session of the Commission on Social Development.

2. This year's theme of "social integration" can be further explored if we understand the phrase to mean "social cohesion". As stated by some countries at the forty-seventh session, social integration seems to presume a "top-down" approach whereby States parties force or coerce integration. The word "cohesion" presumes a more organic process, whereby people freely choose to live together in solidarity with encouragement from the State. This is a more appropriate expression of the international community's desires in terms of social development.

Solidarity

3. We, young people from all regions of the world, commit to living and promoting solidarity in all human relationships. Recalling that the intrinsic dignity of each person is the foundation of all just human interactions, and recalling that this dignity is inalienable and cannot be mitigated in any degree; we affirm that every person is free, possessing the power to choose to act in accordance with the reality of the dignity of all persons. Without an understanding that all human beings have intrinsic worth, social cohesion is impossible.

4. In the light of this understanding of the human person and human relationships, we particularly commit ourselves in solidarity to all those who live in need, experience the vulnerability and hardships of war, famine, disease or social unrest and suffer the poverty of hopelessness. In keeping with this commitment, we have addressed the theme of social cohesion in the context of young people, disabled persons and families. The World Youth Alliance joins the international community in its commitment to encourage social cohesion, especially with members of marginalized groups, and to foster an environment that enables integral development.

Youth

5. Global statistics on the status of young people highlight the need to integrate youth into any development agenda. According to the *World Youth Report (2005)*, youth, defined as persons aged 15 to 24, constitute approximately 18 per cent of the total global population (1.1 billion), and youth and children together, account for nearly 40 per cent of the world's population. In many countries of the world, particularly in the developing world, there is a youth majority with the creative potential to transform society.

6. Owing to poverty and the associated absence of adequate health care, education and employment opportunities, much of the creative potential of young people is lost. Approximately 238 million young people live in extreme poverty, and of these about 133 million are illiterate. Youth comprise approximately 41 per cent of the world's unemployed people. Today millions of adolescents, particularly girls,

also face the prospect of incomplete education, which increases their chances of living in poverty, as well as contracting infectious diseases.

7. We call on States and civil society to invest in and strengthen basic health care, which will allow all members of society to live healthier lives and free them to develop their talents and contribute to the common good. Improvements in basic health care will also reduce the caregiving responsibilities of many young people, particularly in the developing world, and prevent interruptions in their formal education.

8. Finally we ask the international community to show solidarity with families, the greatest influence in the lives of young persons, and to partner with families and their communities to create optimal conditions for the integral development of youth.

9. Concretely, we recommend that Member States:

(a) Fulfil commitments to ensure access to primary and secondary education. They should also work in partnership with civil society to strengthen domestic institutions of higher education and to make university education and vocational training more accessible and affordable. The role of parents and families as the first educators of individuals needs to be respected. Families should be recognized as a critical structure for the continual growth and education of young people;

(b) Introduce, in partnership with civil society, families and communities, programmes that provide alternative educational opportunities for those children and youth who are most vulnerable, or the most marginalized;

(c) Develop policies, especially in developing countries, in collaboration with the private sector, that enable the youth to take an active role in the workforce through training programmes and internships.

Disabled persons

10. Disabled people represent a significant percentage of the global population (approximately 10 per cent) and evidence suggests that persons with disabilities are disproportionately represented among the world's poor. According to a 2008 report of the Economic and Social Council, there are approximately 650 million persons with disabilities in the world. An estimated 80 per cent of these persons live in developing countries, many in conditions of poverty. In developed countries, persons with disabilities are subjected to discrimination that limits their participation in society. Too often Governments and communities fail to provide for the special health care and education services disabled persons need for their integral development.

11. The problem of poverty and exclusion of disabled persons begins with harmful cultural attitudes that see the disabled as undesirable members of society; such attitudes exist in both developed and developing countries. In many countries, genetic diagnosis and prenatal screening technologies are used to identify persons with disabilities prior to birth; these individuals are frequently targeted for termination based solely on their disability. This practice ignores the intrinsic dignity and worth of disabled persons and must be discouraged by the Commission and recognized as a violation of human rights.

12. Solidarity with disabled persons requires an appreciation of their unique gifts and contributions to society as persons. We call on Governments and civil society to establish policies and structures that ensure the integration and participation of people with disabilities in mainstream economic, social and political life. Such policies and structures would address the special health, educational and personal development needs of persons with disabilities and support those who care for them, in particular their families and communities.

13. Concretely, we recommend that Member States:

(a) Develop programmes, in collaboration with civil society, to encourage positive cultural attitudes relating to persons with disabilities. These programmes should offer support and resources to the families and other persons who provide care to persons with disabilities;

(b) Encourage educational opportunities suited to the needs of disabled persons in order to foster their integration in society;

(c) Protect persons with disabilities and other vulnerable members of society from discriminatory practices that deny them their human rights, in particular the use of medical technologies to diagnose disabilities in order to terminate the life of disabled persons before birth. Such practices must be clearly and forcefully condemned by this Commission;

(d) Fulfil their international commitments in the areas of health care, infrastructure, good governance and security and make provisions for the special needs of the most vulnerable members of society.

Families

14. Families sustain society and give life to the next generation. As the fundamental unit of society, the family ensures the sustainability of civilization and culture. It takes on essential tasks in the care of all, especially the weakest and most vulnerable. At its best, the family exemplifies intergenerational solidarity and its failure has tragic consequences for its members, particularly for children, and increasingly for older persons.

15. We call upon States to partner with families and communities in addressing the development needs of socially marginalized persons. Such a partnership requires the creation of employment opportunities and the elimination of discriminatory employment practices, particularly against older persons and women. It also requires the international community to fulfil its commitments in the areas of health care, education, infrastructure, good governance and security. Families, particularly those in poverty, disproportionately bear the effects of gaps in these key development areas.

16. Concretely, we recommend that Member States:

(a) Partner, in coordination with civil society actors, with families, particularly in countries facing rapid population ageing, to develop programmes and resources that will facilitate home-based care and foster intergenerational solidarity;

(b) Develop economic structures that do not penalize individual families for choices in the provision of educational and other developmental needs of their

children and in meeting and providing for the needs of older persons and the disabled;

(c) Develop policies, in partnership with civil society, that will promote economic growth, job creation and access to basic health care and education, particularly for families in rural areas.

17. All persons have an important contribution to make to the human community and many are not afforded the opportunity to do so. Social cohesion is critical for the integral development and well-being of all members of society, particularly youth, the disabled, older persons and families living in poverty.